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Summary:

The year is new but something isn't right.

feed this end

A new year. A new beginning. That's supposed to be the idea.

Up early. Work to be done. Joyce coughs into her elbow before she pins her hair out of her face; it's growing long enough that it needs to be cut but the kitchen scissors went missing at some point during the last two months and she'll be damned if she can remember to replace them. The idea of going downtown to the salon, sitting in that chair and watching the other women watch her with sidelong glances and hushed whispers, is too much to stomach even if she thought she could afford to splurge on the cut itself. The kitchen scissors will have to do if she ever gets around to finding, or replacing, them.

She catches a news report one day, flipping through channels. Will at the Wheelers', Jonathan out doing what he does. She has a moment, she thinks, to breathe. Some little girl went missing down and turned up dead in Missouri, small town not unlike Hawkins where everyone knows everyone. A woman – local mother, not the mother of the girl – crying outside the funeral, in her best black church clothes, dabbing tears from her face with a delicate handkerchief. "We hug all our kids a little bit tighter now," she says with a delicate little sniff, and Joyce's chest physically aches. "No one can possibly know how it feels to lose a child."

They wouldn't know. She pities anyone who knows what it's like to bury a child. There's precedent for that. There's no precedent for getting your buried child back.

Stop the car; change lanes. Stop drifting across the median. The mother on TV means well, certainly. Joyce swallows a bilious gasp and turns off the TV. There's enough time to make tuna casserole.

"No one can possibly imagine how it feels to lose a child..."

She clicks off the talk show after that. *Lose a child*, that phrase. It stings like salt in a papercut. She *lost* Will, it's the only term for it. Lost, misplaced - the point of losing things is that you find them again.

Anyone can imagine how it feels to lose a child; the question is whether they can imagine how it feels to find them again. To beat your way through time and space and dimensionality to recover what was lost. No, nobody can imagine that, they can't and they certainly won't. Not like losing your kid at the supermarket. She's done that, too. She sure as hell knows the difference.

Hopper comes in with the cold rain, unseasonably warm for January but still cold as hell, pine needles stuck to his coat where the wind must have whipped them at his back. Joyce swallows a cough as she watches him kick off his boots at the door, casting a sidelong glance at the hole in the wall he helped fix, the new wallpaper he helped Jonathan put up. With the evidence destroyed, it's like nothing ever happened. Everything is as it was.

The danish is cold, wrapped in plastic wrap and studded with toenail-sized slices of almond. Hopper drops it in her lap without fanfare. "You need to eat."

"I'm all right," she says, and sets it on the table. For later, maybe. He shakes his head.

"No," he says, "you're not." And then he stops, pauses, shakes his head. "How's the cough?"

Joyce clears her throat. "It's fine," she says. "Probably just a cold. It's nothing."

He shakes his head. "Joyce. Don't do this. I know."

She closes her eyes slowly, takes a deep, steadying breath. It goes in easy, fills her lungs with air, her chest expanding as she does it. He's wrong. It's nothing.

"Just a cold," she repeats, arming herself with the thought so as not to let reality set in. She'll deal with reality two hours later, when he's gone and the place isn't safe anymore. "From the weather." And then

she pauses. "Stay for dinner? The boys'll be back late."

"I thought you weren't hungry," he says, looking at her sideways like where the hole in the wall used to be. Joyce feels her face flush over; his hand is warm when he sets it on the small of her back, fingers spreading over most of it. Hopper's a safe place; he makes places safer. As long as he's in here with her, she'll be safe.

(She knows he'd disagree with this, which is why she'd never tell him as much.)

The bedroom's a mess but they'd never dare to do it anywhere else, even with the boys at the Wheelers' for dinner all night. She kicks a pile of clothes out of the way; his hands curl around her jaw, cupping her face like a precious object. He kisses clean. Soft.

They don't talk; they never talk. He's got strong shoulders, arms, a back like a barrel of whiskey. He touches her like he's afraid she'll break at first. She doesn't. She's brittle but unbreakable, and she tells him as such with her body. He's strong, and quiet, and puts his hands on her hips and around her waist and moves her with so much ease that she feels like she might melt in his hands.

Beard, scratchy against her neck as he buries his face there. Joyce closes her eyes. Safe.

They share a cigarette, clothes hastily thrown back on in anticipation of something else. She watches him stub it out in the olive-green ashtray and she coughs, just once, into her elbow.

The world goes black for a minute and something jolts inside her. It might be her imagination, or -

"The lights," Hopper says after a moment, and his voice is low and for the first time, he sounds scared shitless. "Has that happened to you before?"

"No," she says. Telling the truth. "Swear to God."

"I thought it was just me," he mutters.

"Do you think..." And here she trails off. Because it's ridiculous. It's crazy to think. Will was in there for days, and he looks fine, hasn't complained one bit. It wouldn't just be them, she thinks, Will would be sick too. But Hopper coughs again, then, into his elbow, and Joyce's breath hitches as the lights flicker, almost imperceptibly, in the bedroom. "What's happening?" she asks, instead of finishing the thought, and sees his jaw clench as he seems to think it over.

"The air in there," says Hopper. "We brought some of it back with us."

She wishes he hadn't said it out loud.

She wishes.

"I know," she says, and then repeats herself, harsh and acidic. Scrubbing away the armor and comfort of the lie as Hopper rubs at her back with one strong, safe hand. "I know."

The lab doesn't know. The kids can't know.

Some nights the high beams of the car catch falling snowflakes in their light, and she wonders if she's there. If they're both there yet. It doesn't hurt to breathe, and there's no sense seeing the doctor just to be told it's all in her head.

Hopper knows. Hopper knows, and he wraps his hand around hers when she coughs, and she wonders when it'll take them both. Hopper asks her once whether she intends to go back in and it's all she can do not to break down; the thought keeps her up all night, worrying at her like it's got her by the nape of her neck in its teeth. But the answer is simpler than the truth.

All they can do is wait. Arm themselves to the teeth and be ready to fight it when it comes.